

The Prophet's Example A Challenge, At Home and Abroad

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Many followers of Prophet Muhammad (peace upon him) will celebrate the occasion of his birthday, each in their own way. Those who strive toward social reform might hold lectures expounding the importance of following his footsteps and teachings, while those who desire spiritual comfort may sing songs of Prophetic praise that will raise the soul to a dream-world of peace and tranquility. And then there are those who might celebrate his birthday by denouncing both groups. This is, broadly speaking, an example of how we stand divided today.

Yet we should commemorate the Prophet on every occasion. We should bring to mind, not the conditions of his birth, life and death, not his appearance and personal lifestyle, but rather his efforts as God's Messenger, culminating in the achievement of conveying to us the glorious Qur'an.

The reality at home is heart-breaking: Although we do acknowledge The Holy Qur'an as our book of Divine Instruction, yet this Book of God has more bearing today on Muslim's shelves than on their selves.

“Then the Messenger will say:

O my Lord! Truly my people held this Qur'an forsaken!”

H.Q: 25:20

Another tragedy is our closed-minded approach to the Messenger's example:

“You had indeed in the Messenger of God

A beautiful example

For any whose hope is in God and the Last Day,

And he who oft-remembers God”

H.Q.33:21

Indeed we had in our Prophet a beautiful example, and we are not alone in acknowledging the fact. W. Montgomery Watt states in his book *Muhammad, Prophet and Statesman* p.234:

“Muhammad's standards were higher than those of his time. In his day and generation he was a social reformer, even a reformer in the sphere of morals.”

The Prophet (peace be upon him) always motivated his companions towards spiritual enhancement, showing them the path thereto, which is the unsoiled human nature itself. His parting instructions as he bade farewell to two of his earliest envoys were:

*“Facilitate and do not complicate!
Advocate and do not intimidate!
Cooperate and do not separate!”*

Today, we seem to be doing the exact opposite: complicating matters, intimidating everyone, and separating from each other! In developing religious teaching, and dealing with the Prophet's 'Sunna', or Tradition, we have emphasized the least important practices. Those that have little significance on society and the world at large are objects of study and exemplification, while the most important are ignored, those that highly influence Muslims as a whole and the world's relation to Islam.

A present-day scholar of the Azhar University, Sheikh Muhammad Al-Ghazali put this into perspective when he wrote in his book, *The Prophetic Sunna-Among the Scholars of Fiqh and the Scholars of Hadith*, 1989 (p.8):

“Some Muslim youths have succeeded in overturning the tree of Islamic teaching, making its thin branches and twigs take the place of the roots and trunk, while turning the important roots into leaves that drop with the wind!”

Mistakes have been made, and Ghazali cites one of the most serious, stating p.143:

“A pile of weak Hadith has clouded the Islamic horizons, as well as another pile of Sahih (supported) Hadith that have been misinterpreted, or narrated out of context, causing conflict with the Qur'anic evidence! Some people have taken these traditions literally, and in doing so have halted the progress of the Muslim world, and might even have pushed it as far back as the Stone Age!”

Furthermore, in upholding a certain view (important or otherwise) each of us does not leave room for argument or differences of opinion. Thus we are in constant dispute, causing division at home, and failure and loss of authority abroad.

O ye who believe!

When you meet a contingent, then stand firm

And remember God often

That ye might prosper

And obey God and His Messenger,

And do not dispute (amongst yourselves), for then you will fail and lose authority,

And persevere, and God is with those who persevere!

H.Q: 8:45-46

Yet most of us are willing to put up a fight! Alfred Adler, the renowned Austrian psychiatrist, once said, "It is easier to fight for one's principles than to live up to them." How true. And how sad. Had we lived up to our principles many innocent lives would have been spared.

Ghazali spoke out in January of this year at a conference in Cairo held by the International Institute of Islamic Thought (based in Herndon, Virginia) where he stated: "Moral acts and conduct precede acts of worship in Islam. The Muslim disgrace was manifest in Somalia and Afghanistan!" The Arabic Al-Khaleej newspaper carried the full report in its issue of Friday, January 1st of this year (1993).

Reality abroad is just as harsh. Islam is being attacked world-wide. The reasons and motives for these attacks are varied, but the common denominator is that the version of Islam these people have experienced is distasteful. The Islam that is presented to the world, as seen in the conduct and professed intentions of many Muslims worldwide, is not the exemplary version of Islam as it should be. We should illustrate the beauty of Islam for all to acknowledge. Our Prophet did so in the past, and it is our duty to do so in the present.

"We sent thee not but (O Muhammad)

As a mercy to all creatures"

H.Q: 21:107

Ghazali poignantly asks in his book *'The Woman's Cause; Between Customs Inherited and Imported'* p.18, “*What should I say to him? (a stranger asking about what seemed an unjust Islamic practice). Should I defend Islam honestly, or defend Muslims dishonestly?*”

Honesty: Let us follow the Prophet's beautiful example, at home and abroad.

Let us start by being honest.

Montgomery Watt (p.206), sums Prophet Muhammad's reasons for success: “*Foremost among the reasons for this success of Muhammad's was the attractiveness of Islam and its relevance as a religious and social system...*”

We already know enough of our contribution (or lack of it) to Islam's attractiveness. How about the idea of Islam's relevance as a religious and social system? *Honestly* speaking, here again we have failed. We have done our religion a great disservice by forcing our impaired vision of priorities upon everyone, depicting Islam in such a manner that renders our picture of it *irrelevant* as a system for the Humanity of today. *Because the version we presented is deficient, Islam is viewed either as an efficient relic of the past, or as a set of defunct rules for today.* But it is never too late to make amends. Once we have approached our mistakes with honesty, we can move to the difficult task of reviving the true spirit of Islam.

Ghazali outlines the steps that should be taken (p.44 previous ref.):

“*Two things are required of the Islamic revival:*

- 1. Avoiding previous mistakes that caused our nation's deviation, lost its authority and made it prey to enemies.*
- 2. Representing Islam in a pragmatic, attractive manner that would eliminate past suspicions and do justice to the Qur'an.”*

Could this generation meet the challenge, or will we let the problems hang for future generations to deal with? Montgomery Watt penned the challenge to our fathers thirty years ago: p.235

“*The world will sooner or later have to consider seriously whether from the life and teaching of Muhammad any principles are to be learnt which will contribute to the moral development of mankind. It is still open to the Muslims of today, however, to give the rest of the world a fuller and better presentation of their case.*”

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